

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 282 131

CG 019 896

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TITLE Stress and Social Support in Parents of Hyperactive Children.
PUB DATE Aug 86
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (94th, Washington, DC, August 22-26, 1986).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Children; *Coping; Family Life; *Family Problems; *Hyperactivity; Mothers; *Parent Attitudes; Parents; Sex Differences; *Social Support Groups; Stress Management; *Stress Variables

ABSTRACT

The role of social support in moderating stress was examined in 65 parents of hyperactive children. The sample included 29 couples and 7 single mothers. The theoretical framework guiding the research was Lazarus' general model of stress. Each parent's psychological functioning was hypothesized to be a function of the severity of the child's behavior problems; parental appraisal of family strain associated with the child; and the amount, quality, and use of available social support. The buffering effects of social support were tested prior to stress appraisal and after experiencing strain. It was hypothesized that social support is more critical in preventing stress appraisal than in alleviating strain after it has been experienced. Results provided limited evidence for the proposed model of stress and for the stress-buffering properties of social support. Significant effects of support were obtained only for mothers and only in the strain alleviation phase of the stress model. Mothers reported family reliance upon social support as a coping strategy much more than did fathers, and for mothers this reported use of support significantly buffered the impact of perceived strain on depression. Satisfaction with social support had a significant main effect on mothers' general well-being. These findings suggest that social support is more beneficial to mothers than to fathers in families experiencing chronic strain. (Author/NB)

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STRESS AND SOCIAL SUPPORT IN PARENTS OF HYPERACTIVE CHILDREN

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CE 019896

Presented at 94th Annual Convention of the American
Psychological Association, Washington, D.C., August, 1986

This study was based on Joanne Miner's dissertation research and
was conducted as part of a larger research project directed by
Drs. Bruce Baker, Barbara Henker, James Swanson, and Carol
Whalen.

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ABSTRACT

The relationships among the child's problematic behavior, perceived family strain, social support, and psychological functioning were examined in parents of hyperactive children. The theoretical framework guiding the research was Lazarus' general model of stress. Each parent's psychological functioning was hypothesized to be a function of the severity of the child's behavior problems, parental appraisal of family strain associated with the child, and the amount, quality, and use of available social support. The buffering effects of social support were tested at two different points in the proposed stress model: a) prior to stress appraisal, and b) after experiencing strain. It was hypothesized that social support is more critical in preventing stress appraisal (a) than in alleviating strain after it has been experienced (b).

Results provided limited evidence for the proposed model of stress and for the stress-buffering properties of social support. Significant effects of support were obtained only for mothers and only in the strain alleviation phase of the stress model. Mothers reported family reliance upon social support as a coping strategy much more than did fathers, and for mothers this reported use of support significantly buffered the impact of perceived strain on depression. Satisfaction with social support had a significant main effect on mothers' general well-being. These findings suggest that social support is more beneficial to mothers than to fathers in families experiencing chronic strain.

INTRODUCTION

Clinical experience suggests, and a considerable research literature confirms, that parents of atypical children experience unique stressors related to the child's needs and behaviors. Recent research has been guided by the assumption that pathological parental adaptation is a function of the stress associated with the presence of the exceptional child (Crnic, Freidrich, and Greenberg, 1983). However, it is clear that while there may be certain commonalities among different families' reactions to this situation, there are wide individual variations as well (Silver & Wortman, 1980). This suggests that a number of factors mediate the relationship between the presence of an atypical child in the family and parental response to this potentially chronic stressful life condition. A coping resource that seems particularly critical for this population is social support.

The present study examined the role of social support in moderating stress in parents of hyperactive children. The theoretical framework is the general stress model proposed by Lazarus (Lazarus, 1966; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) which considers not only the child's problematic behavior but the impact of that behavior on each parent's perception of family strain. Parents' psychological functioning is hypothesized to be a function of the severity of the child's behavior problems (rated "objectively" by persons other than the parent), the amount of family strain associated with the child's behavior (representing each parent's individual appraisal of the degree to which the

child adversely affects family functioning), and the use, amount and quality of social support available. The assessment of parents' perceptions of family strain is a critical component of the model. In addition to providing a measurable mediating or "anchor point" between the stressor and psychological outcomes, it permitted examination of the role of social support in the initial stress-appraisal process compared to the role of support in alleviating strain after it has been experienced. This comparison of the impact of support at different points in the stress process increases understanding of the mechanisms by which support reduces the effects of a potential stressor on psychological well-being.

HYPOTHESES

A model of the specific relationships tested in the examination of the role of social support in the stress process is presented in Figure 1. In order to gain insight into possible parental differences in coping with child-related stress, hypotheses were tested separately for mothers and fathers.

Hypothesis 1. The relationship between the severity of child behavior problems and psychological well-being will be stronger for mothers than for fathers. Because mothers typically bear a greater proportion of child-rearing responsibilities than fathers, it is anticipated that mothers will be most affected by the child's atypical behavior.

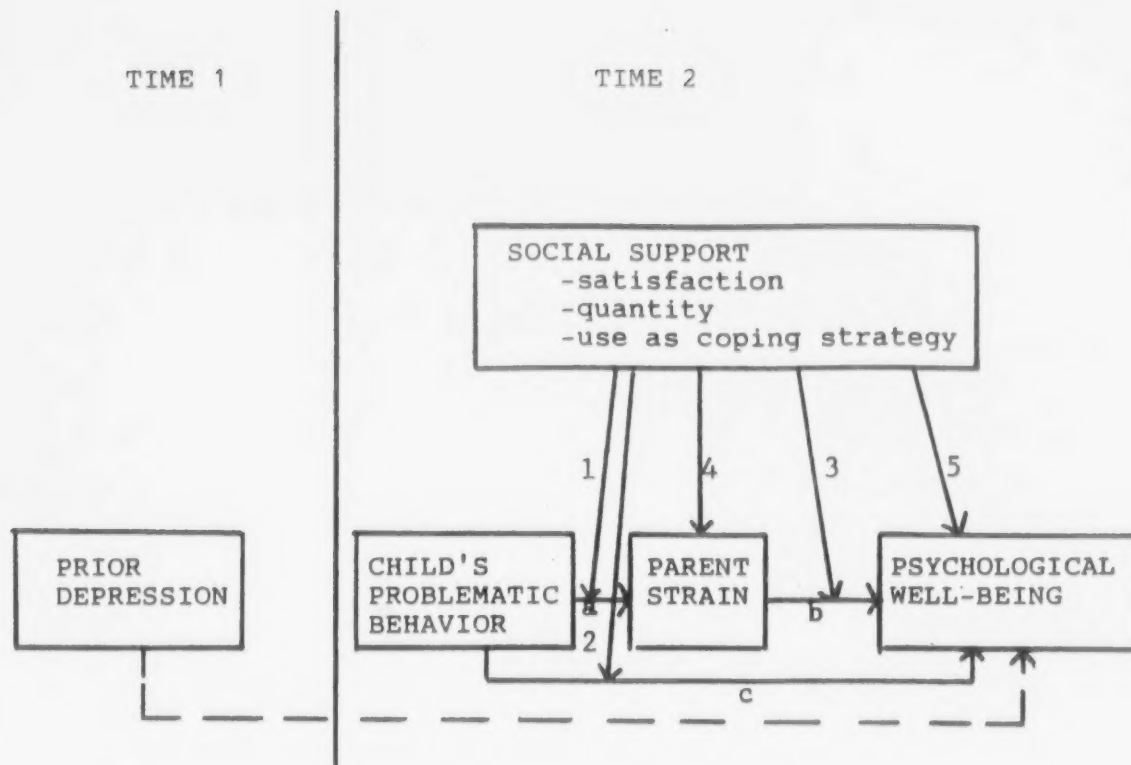


Figure 1. Model of specific relationships tested in examining the role of social support in the stress process. (Arrows 1, 2, & 3 represent buffering effects of social support; arrows 4 and 5 represent main effects of social support on strain and psychological well-being. "a", "b", and "c" represent effects of child behavior (stressors) on strain and psychological well-being.

Hypothesis 2. The relationship between an objective stressor (child's problematic behavior) and parental psychological functioning will be mediated by the parents' cognitive appraisal of the child's behavior as stressful. This is illustrated in Figure 1, and would be confirmed if knowledge of parent strain increased the predictability of depression over that obtained from the child's behavior alone (e.g., arrows "a" and "b" together are better predictors of psychological well-being than is arrow "c").

Hypothesis 3. Social support operates at two different points in the stress process: by altering stressor appraisal and/or by modifying the process through which appraised stress results in adverse psychological outcomes. It is predicted that the stress-buffering properties of social support are more critical in the initial appraisal process, that is, in preventing the perception of strain in the first place (arrow 1 in Fig. 1), rather than reducing strain after it has already been experienced (arrow 3).

Hypothesis 4. Qualitative dimensions of social support (e.g., satisfaction) are more effective in reducing the effects of stress than are quantitative aspects of support. Specifically, it is predicted that satisfaction with social support will be a stress buffer (i.e., will yield significant interaction effects indicated by arrows 1, 2, & 3 in Fig. 1), while quantity of social support will exert small direct effects on perceived strain and psychological well-being (arrows 4 & 5 in the model).

METHOD

Subjects. As a condition of their child's enrollment in a summer research program, sixty-five parents/guardians of hyperactive children age 6 to 14 ($\bar{X}$ = 9.6 years) participated in comprehensive pre- and post-program assessments of family functioning. The sample included 29 marital pairs and seven single mothers.

Procedure. Parent measures (obtained independently from mothers and fathers) were collected the week before the summer program began and approximately two months later at the conclusion of the program. In an effort to alleviate some of the methodological problems associated with a total reliance on self-reported information, a measure of the child's problematic behaviors (the "objective" measure of stress in the model) was obtained from behavior ratings made by the project staff. Measures of stress included a modified version of the Conners Abbreviated Parent-Teacher Questionnaire (Conners, 1973; Goyette, Conners, and Ulrich, 1978), a short-form of the Questionnaire on Resources and Stress (Friedrich, Greenberg and Crnic, 1983), and the Life Experiences Survey (Sarason, et al., 1978). Measures of Social Support included the Social Support Questionnaire (Sarason, et al., 1983), the Marital Adjustment Test (Locke-Wallace, 1959), and the F-COPES (McCubbin, Larsen, & Olson, 1982). The Beck Depression Inventory (Beck, 1967) and a 3-item rating of health, energy, and spirits were used to assess depression and general well-being.

Data Analysis. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to test hypotheses regarding the role of social support in the stress process. In these analyses, Time 1 depression was entered first as a control variable, main effect variables of stress, strain, and/or support were entered second, and interaction terms were entered last. (The impact of negative life events was also entered as a control variable. However, because inclusion of this variable did not alter the significance of the main effect or interaction terms, and because the number of terms in the regression equation was severely limited due to the small sample size, the effect of negative life events was not included in the reported analyses.)

RESULTS

1. The only consistent significant difference between mothers and fathers was the reported use of social support as a family coping strategy. Mothers reported using social resources significantly more than fathers at both assessment periods ($t_1 = 3.99, p < .001, t_2 = 4.12, p < .001$).
2. No significant gender differences were found for depression. In fact, parents in this sample simply were not very depressed. Mean scores ranged from 5.00 to 8.21, a range considered nondepressed in the general population.
3. No significant relationships were found between staff's ratings of the child's problematic behavior and parents' psychological functioning for either mothers or fathers. This suggests that either no true relationship exists or the relationship is mediated or moderated by other variables, such as perceived strain and/or social support.
4. Perceived strain was significantly related to child behavior ($r = .61, p < .01$), depression ($r = .51, p < .05$), and general well-being ($r = -.53, p < .01$) for fathers, but not for mothers.
5. Social support had no impact (either direct or interactive -- arrows 1 and 4 in Fig. 1) on parent strain related to the child's hyperactive behavior. This was true for both mothers and fathers for satisfaction with, quantity, and use of social support. Significant effects of social support were found for mothers only, and only in the strain-alleviation phase of the

stress model. Sole evidence for the buffering hypothesis was found for Time 1 use of support as a coping strategy, interacting with parent strain to predict Time 2 depression. When use of support as a coping strategy was assessed at the same time as depression (both Time 2 measures), general reliance upon support had a main effect on depression, but it had no significant buffering effect. The only other significant effect of social support was a main effect of satisfaction with support predicting general well-being in mothers.

6. Because only one significant effect of either qualitative or quantitative social support was obtained, the evidence provided no basis for inferring that different dimensions of social support have specific stress-buffering properties.

CONCLUSIONS

Results provided little evidence for the proposed stress model. However, findings did suggest that there may be significant gender differences in terms of importance of social support as a coping strategy and the effectiveness of support in reducing the impact of a potential stressor. It appears that social support is a more important resource for mothers of hyperactive children than it is for fathers.

Several possible explanations exist for the overall failure to validate the proposed stress model. These include characteristics of the sample (small N when mothers' and fathers' data were analyzed separately, lack of subject variability on social support measures and measures of psychological functioning), temporal factors (measuring social support and psychological functioning after the chronic stressor had been operative for some time), and, perhaps, failure to measure the type of support most relevant to the particular stressor. Furthermore, this research focused primarily on depression as the dependent variable (although a general measure of well-being was also included). Results, however, indicated that parents in this sample simply were not very depressed. This suggests that future research might more profitably focus on healthy family adaptation to stressful situations (e.g., cognitive and behavioral coping strategies) rather than continuing to expect and assess negative effects.

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